

[Gardenia Banta]

Beliefs & Customs - [Miscellany?] Wash 9-21 [1?]

FOLKLORE

NEW YORK Forms to be Filled out for Each Interview

FORM A Circumstances of Interview

STATE New York

NAME OF WORKER Dorothy West

ADDRESS 228 W. 22nd St.. New York City

DATE September 9, 1938

SUBJECT INTERVIEW FOR FOLK MATERIAL WITH MRS. GARDENIA BANTA

1. Date and time of interview

September 8, 1938 3-5 P. M.

2. Place of interview

Home of Informant: 272 Manhattan Ave.

3. Name and address of informant

Mrs. Gardenia Banta 272 Manhattan Avenue

4. Name and address of person, if any, who put you in touch with informant.

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5. Name and address of person, if any, accompanying you

6. Description of room, house, surroundings, etc.

Comfortably furnished five-room apartment. Interview held in the living room, apparently the most lived in room in apartment. Room held the usual three piece suite, a portable phonograph, a radio and a grand piano. The apartment faces Morningside Park. The neighborhood is mixed: Spanish, Negroes, a scattering of Irish and Greeks.

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NEW YORK

FORM B Personal History of Informant

STATE New York

NAME OF WORKER Dorothy West

ADDRESS 228 W. 22nd St. New York City

DATE September 9, 1938

SUBJECT INTERVIEW FOR FOLK MATERIAL WITH MRS. GARDENIA BANTA.

1. Ancestry

Father born in South Carolina - an American Negro. Mother born in Georgia - an American Negro.

2. Place and date of birth

Savannah, Ga., July 6, 1871

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3. Family

Twice widowed. Apartment is shared by widowed niece and grandniece and grand-nephew.

4. Places lived in, with dates

Savannah, Ga. from birth until 1888. Resident of New York City, without interruption, from 1888 until present.

5. Education, with dates

Grammar school education received in Savannah. Attended a private school run by Episcopalians. Began school when she was eight.

6. Occupations and accomplishments, with dates

Dressmaker, professional politician (census taker, campaign worker, etc.)

7. Special skills and interests

Interested in the Eastern Star, a fraternal and benevolent organization for women. From informant's description of speech which she delivered before her chapter, she is an active member.

8. Community and religious activities

Member of many years standing of St. Philip's Episcopal Church. Very active when health permits.

* 9.* Description of informant

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Large, coffee colored woman (weighing close to 210 lbs.) with a shrewd but pleasant face. Her hair is dyed black, gray strands showing at back of neck. Dressed in a clean, simple housedress.

10. Other Points gained in interview

* Her nails were painted a modest pink. Keen sense of humor.

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NEW YORK

FORM C Text of Interview (Unedited)

STATE New York

NAME OF WORKER Dorothy West

ADDRESS 228 W. 22nd St. New York City

DATE September 9, 1938

SUBJECT INTERVIEW WITH MRS. GARDENIA BANTA.

You asking me all these things — just like little Johnny. Two little boys were playing together. Another little boy came up and said, "How old are you, Johnny?" Johnny looked up and said, "I don't know. I been here so long I forgot; you better ask Tommy."

I remember this: In Mississippi when Lincoln was getting Mose (Negroes) free, the rebels got so angry they got husbands and wives, and brothers and sisters together. Lincoln got ahead of them (rebels) and got the slaves together at a big plantation. He was going to get them across the river to safety. The rebels got so mad they ran all those people in the river. They all got drowned. One man escaped and got to the place of safety Lincoln meant

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for them to go to. That's how came the song: T'ank'e Master Jesus, Lincoln set us free.
T'ank'e Master Jesus, Lincoln save our lives.

Didn't but one man get free, but they sung that song just the same. Mothers held up their babies and asked the Lord to save them. But all those people, all 'cept that man, got drowned.

The rebels destroyed everything they got to with an ax. That 2 was supposed to be the Republicans, Lincoln's side, but the rebels were Democrats. They found the old man in the bushes starving to death. They tied him up by his thumbs 'till he died. But he got across in the first place.

My mother told me all those things . She used to sing: Happy day when Elijah pray And the fire fell from heaven that day.

My father said to her one day, "That's one mistake of the Negro church. No fire ever fell from heaven."

This morning when I was blue, I prayed - the Episcopalian prayer-and I was singing "Jesus Knows All About My Troubles": Jesus knows all about my troubles, He'll keep me to the end.

That's all I know but I heard that song all my life and I been singing it all my life. I used to hear my mother sing it but that's still all I know.

I'm a 44 year old member of St. Philip's Episcopal Church. My mother sent me to the Episcopal school in Savannah to keep me from the other children. You know how you get things from other children. She sent all of us to the Episcopal School. You can't go to the Episcopal school unless you're christened and confirmed. I'm still Episcopal. My sister is a Baptist. Right after I came to New York, Father ——— (from the Episcopal church in Savannah) came to St. Philip's. He saw my name in the membership book and he told

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Father Bishop (of St. Philip's) to keep a watch-eye on me. And I can't miss three Sundays unless Father comes by and raps on my door. "No. I won't come in. I just to know why you haven't been to church."

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...Ain't she funny asking me all them foolish questions?...

We played a ring game that went like this: You go round the mulberry tree And I'll go 'round the cherry. Hug her and kiss her And call her honey.

Sometimes the game broke up when some of the children said their mamas didn't want them kissing.

Did you ever hear of Fish-Tail? Well, we used to play a game called Fish-Tail. Each child must be a part-of the fish. The fins, the gills, the eyes, the scales — anything. Of course the funniest part is the one that is the tail. 'Course they'd be delicate (the children who had taken the role of the fish's tail) and they wouldn't want to say it. But the leader would make everybody say what they were. The last child called on would have to say "Fish-tail".

Did you ever hear of the Mirror Game? Well, you'd have a stand — a chair or something. You laid the mirror down flat on it (face down). Then somebody stood by the mirror. The other players take the role of some animal you could be anything. We (informant and sister) were always big and fat and we were always the elephants and the teddy-bears. The leader who stood by the mirror said, "Come on up and see if you can spot what you are". You went up and looked at the back of the mirror and you'd say, "No, I don't see it". Then the leader would turn the mirror over and when the child would come up, the leader would say, "I see the monkey" when the child looked in the mirror.

.....I can't think of no more nonsense...Calling your businss nonsense...

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You could get all that stuff from old story books for little children. That would be easier. Once I had to give a speech to the Eastern Star (a fraternal organization for women). I had to tell about Prince Hall — It was the Prince Hall Chapter. I chopped up pieces of somebody's speech here and a speech there and then I put it all together. It was a good speech. Anyway, they said it was.

I was born in Savannah, Georgia. My mother was born in Georgia and my father was born in South Carolina; and my child is yet to be born. I've had two husbands.

A man went to the crazy-house and they told him after a while that if he kept on improving he could go home. He sat down and wrote to his people that he'd be coming home soon. He licked the stamp and put it down on a roach (unknown to him). The roach carried the stamp up to the ceiling. He watched the roach running up there, and saw that it didn't leave the room. Still watching he said, "Damn, if I'm going home as fast as you're carrying that stamp home, I'll never get home."...I didn't stay 'till the roach come down.

When I first came to New York I stopped at 122 W. 25th Street, between Sixth and Seventh Avenues. I came here in 1888. I joined St. Philip's Church when it was down in 25th Street. Up here (111th St.) you could count the people that passed in a day. I could do that when I moved up here. I used to sew for some people who lived at 315 W. 113th Street when I lived downtown and that was coming way up town.

I've never lived as well up here as I did in Savannah. We lived well. I've never lived so well up North. My father had a good job and he was a good-looking man. He used to buy 1/2 barrel of flour, 5 a sack of hominy weighing 100 lbs.; 1/2 middle of bacon, 2 hams, and all things like that at one time. We had so much groceries, we had a regular storeroom for them. We didn't live in the country, either. We owned our own home in Savannah. Then my father bought a place in a section called Toll-Gate. It's in the city-limits now. My father got a place on Water's Road — it's called Water Street now — and he had a farm. He bought 10 cows. We used to sell the milk wholesale. When they'd bring the milk by to sell,

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they'd leave us two and three quarts. When the cows weren't giving much, we'd only have one quart and they'd sell all the rest. After my father died, my mother sold our house in the city — things weren't going as good as they were when my father was living-and she had the house (barn) for the cows fixed up and we all lived in there. It was a nice little six room place and we stayed on there on the farm.

Up here folks (Negroes) go on about Myles Paige and Watson (Negro justices). My father was a magistrate. He was a magistrate on the east side of Savannah. Everybody called him Judge Matthews...His name was William Henry Matthews and my mother was Mary Matthews...Colonel Woodhouse was magistrate on the west side...Yes, Colonel Woodhouse was a Negro. Everybody knew Judge Matthews and Colonel Woodhouse. Colonel DeVoe was another colored man everybody knew. My father was elected for two terms — they had four year terms — and following that Jamison (another Negro) got it. After that my father was transferred to the Port of Customs in Brunswick, Ga. They still called him Judge in Brunswick. Everywhere he went they called him Judge...That was right after Benjamin Harrison's time and Arthur was vice-president...(She got up to look for a calendar which she had giving the names and dates of office of all the presidents.

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She was unable to find it.) You look it up. It was the time right after Benjamin Harrison's time.

I've been a Republican all my life except for two terms when I worked with the Democrats. I helped take a census once, but that was politics. Our President just sail under the Democratic flag to be President. He's a Democrat in his heart because he is free but on the ticket voting he's a stomp down Republican. All the Roosevelt's are Republican.

There was a girl who stayed here with me. She was always talking about how southern people don't have any sense and all like that. Now, that girl was born up here but her people were all born in the South. She calls herself a northerner. She's no northerner.

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If her people, her parents, had been born up here, and then she was born here, she'd be a northerner. But her people were born in the South so she's no northerner. If her people had been born up here, she wouldn't have that on her tongue (the southern form of speech). Now take the West Indians. Just because a child is born here, that doesn't mean that child's not a West Indian. If that child's parents had been born here, they wouldn't have that on their tongue (the West Indian accent.)

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NEW YORK

FORM D Extra Comment

STATE - New York.

NAME OF WORKER - Dorothy West.

ADDRESS - New York City. 228 W. 22nd St.

DATE - September 9, 1938.

SUBJECT - Interview with Mrs. Gardenia Banta.

Mrs. Banta expressed an interesting and lengthy opinion on the current James J. Hines trial. In giving the resume of Mr. Hines' life and activities as she understands the facts, she very often used the phrase, "Individual to hisself". She also used the phrase, "he wouldn't have it on his tongue", apparently referring to the knowledge of certain things as one might say, "have it on his conscience". In discussing the trial, the informant readily used the term, "bump off".

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She was agreeable to a second interview and promised, meanwhile, to try to recall any information which might be of use to the interviewer.